Race, Gender, and Identity in Art AIDS America: A conversation with Kia Labeija and Sur Rodney (Sur)

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On the heels of the recent controversy over a lack of representation of black artists in the exhibition ART AIDS AMERICA, Visual AIDS Artist+ Member Kia Labeija and writer, curator and archivist Sur Rodney (Sur) discuss the exhibition in this moving video interview.

Race, Gender, and Identity in Art AIDS America: A conversation with Kia Labeija and Sur Rodney (Sur) short/exhibition version from KSU MHHE on Vimeo.

Organized by the Zuckerman Museum of Art, Videographer, Ben Goldman

Excerpted highlights from "Race, Gender, and Identity in Art AIDS America: A conversation with Kia Labeija and Sur Rodney (Sur)"

Sur Rodney (Sur): I wrote for the Art AIDS America Catalog. I'm a writer, curator and archivist. And I worked within my archiving work with helping establish the archiving project at Visual AIDS. I was invited to write an essay for the catalog that talked about the history of shows around HIV/ AIDS and the institution. A whole history, so I went back to the mid-80's to create a timeline and move forward. And I discovered a lot through that in terms of the patterns and how people's ideas about AIDS have changed and affected people's interests in exhibitions and how they developed. When they decided to do the show, I was quite impressed; I thought it was quite important. When I saw the checklist, it was quite clear to me that it was going to be a show that was predominately meant to play into the art world's recognition of most of the big name artists. So it would be much of the same. I didn't give it much thought beyond that, because I've been in the art world for so long. I sort of expected it. I didn't expect the reaction to it—but I'm glad the reaction did come up. The curators called me at the time of the protests because I'm friendly with them and I've written for the catalog and I congratulated them for creating a platform that allowed the protests to happen.

Kia Labeija: I'm one of the artists in the show. And I'm proud to say that I'm the only female African American artist in the show. I am also the only representation of mother to child transmission of HIV in the show. And I'm the only woman who is living with HIV who is an artist in the show. When I was invited to participate in Art AIDS America, I was very very excited. I'm still

very excited and honored to be a part of such a big big show. But at the same time when I heard that out of 107 artists, there were only 4 artists that identity as African American, and me being the only female representation of African American women in the show: It hurt very much for me because I've always felt like especially women of color are not recognized as being apart of the AIDS epidemic. We are very very silenced, we're not really funded, we don't have community. As a child born with HIV who lost her mother at 14, I felt very very alone for a long time. And to be a part of this show and to still feel like I'm standing alone just really affected me in a very deep way. So I think it's been really great to have conversation around what that means and what it means for institutions to recognize who's lives matter. And I don't think they particularly really thought about us. Or maybe its not that they didn't think about us, but I just think that they could have thought a little bit deeper. And searched a little bit more.

Sur Rodney (Sur): I think part of the problem is that it's not really that they there wasn't a lot of thinking that they really needed to compel themselves to put into the show. Because there's such a history that's been ensconced through the activism and through ACT UP, that has probably fueled a lot of the interest in the show. What's really interesting to me about that is that when I was researching another project and I looked at something like ACT UP of course there's GRAN FURY and all the groups that have come out and done stuff. I recognized that there were a lot of people of color there, and some of them that created collectives that we never really hear about. Right. So part of that marginalization started going way way way back to the early history. Because the people that had the power in that group and the people that had the money were mostly white men so the women were sort of marginalized and put to the sides as were people of color that worked in their own collectives that weren't given the same attention because it was driven by these other groups that had many more links to power and media. I remember talking to Kia the other day and you were talking about how you remember being at these early ACT UP events and there were, you did engage or noticed that there were women in the group. But you've never really seen any that many in that history or the films that have been created after that. So it gets into this thing of well, if we don't know about it it doesn't exist, which is a very awful premise to start with. And if you start to research what you do know and go into it deeply enough you start to find all these other things. And its convenient to not have to because you're playing to what's been out there already. And just giving it your own spin, or reinforcing it, or putting the same parts of the puzzle together in the same way. So the idea that in doing that, that is has actually hit I think a lot of the anger sort of comes out because I think there were discussions with the curators previously by some of the groups and some of the writers. I talked to one writer whose text never made it into the catalog who had talked about some of the concerns when he looked at the list, and all those seem to be pushed by the wayside and I think it was pushed by the wayside to create more of a show that could be acceptable to the institutions, knowing names. So it became a political institutional sort of thing rather than really trying to address what it really needs to address which is AIDS in America and what kind of production is happening around that. And there's a lot of production around that which is not represented in the show. When I was doing my research on artists of color who were doing work on HIV/AIDS I found a lot of it, but I had to dig though a lot of stuff. It was just lying below the surface. Or if you asked people about it you would get leads to things but they were always very soft. But the results that came out of this were amazing. Some really amazing stuff! And you're saying well how can this be ignored because if it's

a play between white guy who already has gallery representation, he can go out there and say I'm HIV positive and I'm doing this work, so it's important. A person of color who is outside of that box who is trying to get in, who can't for a lot of reasons there's a whole history of that. It's sort of left by the wayside. And to ignore that particularly with consideration of this show and the subject and trying to look at it as an issue, trying to galvanize the whole thing and not look at that is I don't know, I wont say irresponsible, I could say that but it seems kind of like inexcusable, really.

Kia Labeija: I understand that this show they wanted to make it a big show with lots of big name works. But there's so many other avenues that they could have gone on, there are other routes, there are other kind of representation that you can also showcase, if you want to showcase other brown and black people. For me, my name is Kia Labeija, and I'm from the iconic house of Labeija and in ballroom, I think there's so much response from ballroom from voguing from the underground scene from the kiki scene which is now hitting the mainstream. There is a direct response to HIV/ AIDS. That is brown and black bodies that are directly affected by the epidemic that are creating work to create incredible incredible pieces you know, maybe you could have taken some pictures from the Latex Ball, some video. Anything. I just in my opinion think that if ART AIDS AMERICA was 10 years in the making as they say, that's a decade, that's a third of the AIDS epidemic. In my opinion I just don't understand why our stories are left out and why our stories are continued to be left out.

I like to talk about my work because I feel like you can see my photographs, you can see my images and a lot of people who have no context will just say "pretty girl in nice outfit, placed really nice, framed in good picture, and in interesting looking environment." When it's so much deeper than that because the portraits are really more about space than they are about me. The portraits are about lived experience in space. If you look in all the portraits there are all the little clues about me that exist there. And when I put myself in my portrait I act as Kia Labeija, who is like my personality, my character, the mask that I put on to be able to feel comfortable to talk about these issues by feeling pretty at the same time, not having to feel like what I sometimes see in artwork that's been made about when the AIDS epidemic was really in its sad prime in the 80's and the early 90's. These sad wasted bodies and sunken in faced. And feeling very much like I wanted to separate myself from that because it's not my experience, and its not everyone's experience, everyone's experience is different. What is most important to me about my work is that by creating it and putting it out into the world I've been able to create community. That's really what the work is about—not being quiet and silence about things that have impacted me very deeply. And that I've been quiet about for so long because I didn't have anyone to talk to about it, so I just talk to the world about it. And in doing that I get like emails and Facebook, all these things of people saying like "oh I feel the same way" and in that creating a whole new network of a space to feel comfortable to talk about my experience, and a space to heal from a lot of the very violent silence I had to deal with for so long after I lost my mom.

Kia Labeija is a multidisciplinary artist born and raised in the heart of New York City's theatre district, Hells Kitchen. Her work explores the intersections of community, politics, fine art and activism. As a visual artist she stages digital portraits as theatrical and cinematic re-imaginings of non fictional events to spark conversation, complicating the way we view her subjects and the

spaces in order to occupy. Her Portraiture utilizes the medium of story telling, to preserve histories, and make sociopolitical commentaries on current events. She is a featured artist in Art, AIDS, America, along side Keith Haring, Annie Leibovitz, Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorp, where she is the only representation of a female artist of color living with and born with HIV. A performer by nature, Labeija is a member of the Iconic House of Labeija and uses Voguing as a performance practice and community based work. She can regularly be seen walking functions in the underground House/Ballroom scene holding titles from The New York Awards Ball, The Latex Ball, and House Dance International. As a voguer she has performed and curated events in collaboration with MoMa PS1, The Brooklyn Museum, AFROPUNK, H&M, Fergie and Red Bull Music Academy. She speaks frequently in public on the subject of HIV/AIDS and is an advocate for under represented communities living HIV positive including long term survivors, women, minorities and children born with the virus. As a public speaker she has been invited to speak at The CUNY Graduate Center, New York University, and The New York Public Library. She has been honored in POZ magazine's POZ 100 list of HIV/AIDS activists under 30, and HIV Plus Magazines 20 most amazing HIV Positive Women, featured in VICE, The New York Times, Paper Magazine and Time Out New York. She has studied at prestigious institutions such as The Juilliard School, The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and The New School University.

Sur Rodney (Sur) is a writer, artist, archivist and activist. A fixture on the East Village art scene, Sur was co-director, with business partner Gracie Mansion, of the celebrated Gracie Mansion Gallery (1983–88), which helped establish the international reputations of many young and emerging artists. In the late 1980s, Sur shifted his practice to work with artists affected by the growing AIDS crisis, leading to his involvement with Visual AIDS and the Frank Moore Archive Project. He also began to collaborate on curatorial projects with his longtime partner Geoffrey Hendricks, organizing a series of exhibitions related to art and AIDS.

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